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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 000265

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TAGS: PGOV, PHUM, ELAB, KDEM, VE
SUBJECT: WSF: BOLIVARIAN HIJACK OR ANTI-IMPERIALIST FIZZLE?

REF: A. CARACAS 00124
B. CARACAS 00260

Classified By: Robert Downes, Political Counselor,

for Reason 1.4(b).

Summary

1. (C) President Hugo Chavez probably fell short of dazzling anti-globalist activists during the January 24-29 World Social Forum (WSF) in Caracas. The six-day event ended without fanfare, suggesting that activists either were disenchanted with the progress of their yearly pow wow or annoyed by the Bolivarian pseudo-ideology that Chavez grafted onto the event. "Another World is Possible" was the WSF's official theme, but unofficially it was "stopping U.S. imperialism," and a bitter anti-U.S. message permeated the conference. Some press reports claimed that participants who criticized Chavez were squelched, and an alternate forum reportedly broke off to protest Chavez' ideological and financial support of the Forum. While we are not in a position to judge the Forum's contribution to the world anti-globalist movement, we expect the WSF organizers will have to de-toxify from Chavez and re-focus their message before the next major event. End summary.

2. (C) Venezuela hosted the Sixth World Social Forum (WSF) in Caracas January 24-29 as a counterpoint to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. The Caracas WSF (there are two other regional WSF events in Bamako and Karachi) drew far fewer, in our opinion, than the 60,000 people announced; it was certainly off from the 120,000 organizers were expecting (ref a). To be fair, the closure of the main highway connecting Caracas to its international airport, due to the failure of the major bridge on the route, likely discouraged some potential attendees. Emboffs and visiting DRL Labor Officer attended three days of the marathon forum.

Did Chavez Steal the Show?

3. (U) This is the first year the WSF did not meet at its traditional site in Porto Alegre, Brazil. The decision at last year's WSF to hold a regional WSF in Caracas stirred speculation that WSF guest star President Hugo Chavez would wrest control of the premiere anti-globization event from Brazilian President Ignacio Lula da Silva. Judging from

reactions we observed personally and from Internet and media coverage, we do not think that happened. Press reports noted that WSF organizers and participants were uncomfortable with the reported US\$8 million Chavez put up to support the Forum.

Septel details the over-the-top "Democracy Fiesta" that the government staged just outside the main conference area, which probably raised a few eyebrows from the activists who normally eschew contact with governments. (Note: On February 1, the government ran a national broadcast "cadena" lauding Venezuela's leadership of the WSF. The short info-mercial kicked off with Chavez speaking while the Socialist International played in the background, a unabashed attempt to link Chavez to the traditional world socialist movement.) President Ignacio Lula da Silva did not attend as in previous years -- his presence last year in Porto Alegre drew some jeers because of corruption scandals -- though several Brazilian ministers attended. There were unconfirmed press reports that some WSF celebrities, such as Ignacio Romanet of Le Monde Diplomatique, purposely stayed away from the Chavez-linked event. (Note: The French Embassy here told us their government was more focused on the WSF regional event in francophone Mali.)

4. (C) There were allegations in the private media here that the Bolivarians were dominating the agenda to the annoyance of attendees. Certainly pro-government groups and even government entities held numerous workshops under the WSF banner that touted the results of the Venezuelan government's social missions. Several sessions explored the concepts of Bolivarianism, Marxism, and "21st Century Socialism." Other

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events focused on Bolivarian revolutionary movements in other countries. Poloff sat in on a workshop hosted by the "Hands Off Venezuela!" anti-imperialist movement, which started after the April 2002 near-coup and which claims chapters in some 30 countries. Poloff listened briefly to a British citizen working with Bolivians to "free the coca leaf from 500 years of domination by Coca Cola and cocaine cartels." While the Bolivarian theme was certainly present, we did not detect that it was smothering the rest of the substantive agenda -- which encompassed some 2,000 events.

5. (C) We also note that Chavez did not deliver a closing

address on January 29 nor was the closing ceremony the premiere event, as has been the tradition of the WSF. He did make several appearances, including at a large event at Caracas' Poliedro on January 27 in which he spoke endlessly about his Revolution as the vanguard of social movements. About 5,000 attended the event, though photos suggest the crowd was augmented by the standard red-shirted Chavistas. There was minimal press coverage of the event locally, however. On the closing night, Chavez opted for a meeting with a smaller group in the Military Club at Fuerte Tiuna, Venezuela's military headquarters. It was an anti-climatic event that certainly did not grab headlines like Chavez' Porto Alegre keynote in 2005. We speculate that the fizzled ending was a combination of "Chavez fatigue" as well as "forum fatigue," noting the larger question posed by WSF organizers in the media of whether such annual mass meetings are played out as a means of stopping globalization.

Gringo Bashing Always Sells, However

6. (C) Although conference organizers settled on the ambiguous slogan of "Another World is Possible" for this WSF, our conclusion is that "Stopping the U.S. Empire" was the real theme. Meeting areas were filled with anti-U.S., anti-capitalist, anti-war and anti-imperialist propaganda. The WSF started on January 24, in fact, with a "March Against War and Imperialism" in downtown Caracas. Although the event made the press, turnout appeared to be embarrassingly low, with some observers suggesting fewer than 10,000 marching. U.S. Anti-war activist Cindy Sheehan was the most popular WSF star, who characterized President Bush as a "terrorist" and called for international help in bringing down the "U.S. empire." Chavez also highlighted the presence of Elma Beatriz Rosado, widow of slain Puerto Rican nationalist (and fugitive from justice) Filiberto Ojeda. Rosado, backed by Chavez, accused the USG of assassinating her husband.

7. (C) The 800-plus official Cuban delegation also hammered the anti-gringo nail. The Cubans held dozens of anti-U.S. events, with a special emphasis on the "Cuban Five" who were convicted in 2001 of spying in Florida. The "International Court of Women" staged a mock trial of President Bush in which a daughter of one of the Five gave testimony -- the President was convicted of violating the human rights of

Iraqis and Cubans. Poloff attended (discreetly) a session at the "Poverty in the United States" pavilion entitled "Locking Horns with the Empire: Challenging the U.S. Blockade Against Cuba," hosted by the pro-Cuba group "Pastors for Peace." Amcit speakers lambasted the USG on the Cuba embargo policy, footage of which was replayed liberally on Venezuelan official media channels. (One visible and senior member of the Cuban delegation was the mullet-wearing Minister of Culture, Abel Prieto, seen by emboffs hustling elderly delegates onto a bus. In what would have been a notable security lapse, press reports indicate Prieto's laptop was stolen from his room at the BRV-owned, Cuban-managed Anauc Hilton.)

Critics, And An "Alternate Forum" Emerges

8. (U) The press reported that a few hundred activists attended an "Alternative Social Forum" organized by Venezuelans to support the anti-globalist line but also to criticize growing authoritarianism in Venezuela. The

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organizers, self-described as freethinking communists and anarchists, said they felt the WSF no longer represented them. A communist group, Radical Criticism of Brazil, also complained that "representatives" of the Venezuelan government violated their right to freedom of expression when they attempted to confiscate a sign that equated Chavez, Bolivian President Evo Morales, President Bush, and others with capitalist decadence.

Comment

9. (C) We noted intense interest in some events, such as a labor forum organized by well-established international labor groups. But much of the Forum came off as flaky, exaggerated by Chavez' eagerness to be seen as the messiah of anti-globalists. In our opinion, accepting that the WSF is a diverse crowd, Chavez failed to win the hearts and minds of the world's disaffected and intellectually disgruntled. We

are not in a position to assess whether the worldwide anti-globalist movement experienced a setback with this Forum, but our impression was that it was a flat tire. We imagine that conference organizers will want to move past the Caracas event quickly and focus on the WSF 2007, slated for somewhere in Africa.

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